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ABSTRACT

Since confusion continues to exist over what teachers mean when they say they are holding a discussion over previously assigned content reading materials, a study compared and contrasted the verbal and nonverbal interactions between teachers and students (or students and students) in eight content area classrooms in rural high schools in Georgia. Prior to the videotaping, teachers were told to ask the students to engage in a discussion of the reading materials that were assigned the day before. Results showed a relationship between the type of interaction pattern observed (discussion versus recitation) and the particular content area in which the observations were made. By comparison, the teachers of social studies and literature encouraged more recitation-like interactions than did their colleagues who taught science and health/human development. The science and health/human development teachers--more than the social studies and literature teachers--expected students to participate in whole class discussion as a follow-up to the reading assignments. Data suggested that the teachers communicated certain procedural display models from which students were able to pick up cues as to their expected participation in a whole class discussion. Further studies should deal with students' perceptions of such practices. (HOD)

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Discussion vs. Recitation in the Secondary Classroom

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Discussion vs. Recitation in the
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Confusion continues to exist over what teachers mean when they say they are holding a discussion over previously assigned content reading materials. To some, a discussion is operationally defined as students participating with the teacher in reviewing the important ideas, arguing the pros and cons of a topic, or merely asking questions in an attempt to relate new information to past experience (Roby, 1985). To others, a discussion is tantamount to the teacher, alone, discussing (i.e., lecturing on) a topic. To still others, discussion is a term loosely applied to an interaction cycle that is more commonly known as the recitation method. Recitation is characterized by three basic moves: the teacher solicits a student to answer a question; the student responds; and the teacher evaluates or modifies the student's answer (cf. Bellack et al., 1966; Stodolsky et al., 1981).

Although an earlier study by Alvermann et al. (1984), identified specific social and communicative patterns in classroom instructional talk that seemed to distinguish discussions from recitations, it left unanswered the question of whether the type of interaction pattern observed (i.e., discussion vs. recitation) varied according to the

content area classroom observed. Perhaps students in first period literature class found it necessary to follow a different set of participatory rules (including how to gain the floor, how to negotiate turntaking) when they moved to second period science class. Green and Harker (1982), who were aware of such a possibility and its potential for causing teaching and learning problems, urged further exploration of how a teacher's expectations for students' participation in one content area might prepare (or fail to prepare) them for participation in another content area.

The purpose of this study was to compare and contrast the verbal and nonverbal interactions between teachers and students (or students and students) in eight content area classrooms. Particular attention was paid to the breaks that occurred in a teacher's established participatory norms. Documenting those breaks and the consequences that followed provided additional clues to a teacher's expectations for student participation in classroom instructional talk. According to Green and Weade (1985):

> At such points, teachers must reestablish, repair, or suspend the norm. Therefore, by observing what teachers do at such points, students and observers alike receive cues to expected behaviors and teacher goals. (p. 16)

Method

Research Setting

The teachers and students who participated in this study attended schools located in rural northeast and central Georgia. Two of the teachers, both white females and each with over 10 years of teaching

experience, taught seventh grade social studies to groups of high-achieving, predominately white students. The two eighth grade literature classes, consisting of predominately black low-achievers, were taught by teachers in schools located over 100 miles apart. One was a black female who was in her first and last year (by choice) of teaching; the other was a white male who had been teaching for over 15 years and who was presently serving as the chair of his school's English Department. The two eighth grade science teachers were also in schools separated by more than 100 miles. One of them, a white female with over 25 years of teaching experience, taught earth science to a high-achieving and racially balanced group of students. The other teacher, a male and also white, taught the only section of advanced general science in a predominately black school. Finally, the two health/human development teachers in this study, one a white female and the other a black male, had less than five years teaching experience each. Both taught in the same predominately black secondary school, but the female teacher worked with nine learning and/or emotionally disabled students (ages 12-15) while the male teacher taught all average achieving boys.

Procedure

The eight content area teachers who participated in the present study were selected using a theoretical sampling procedure described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). A research assistant and I met a number of times with school district administrators and potential teacher participants before arranging an initial visit to a participating teacher's classroom. The only directions we gave the teacher were

these: "Please have the students engage in a discussion of the reading materials that were assigned the day prior to our visit." The day before the actual videotaping of a lesson, we set up the equipment to acclimate students to our presence in the classroom. On the day previous to the taping, I also took field notes that included a description of the general make-up of the class and the activity flow for that particular class period.

On the day of the actual videotaping, the research assistant handled the production aspects of the taping, while I took field notes. A supplementary sound system was set up so that students' voices could be picked up from all corners of the room. In a post study meeting, each teacher viewed his/her own videotapes and confirmed or modified my interpretations of the events I had selected for inclusion in the analysis. Data analysis was a two-step procedure. First, a microethnographic analysis of the videotapes yielded written descriptions of the eight teachers' participatory contexts. Some of the descriptions included examples of Bloome's (1983) concept of a question-answer procedural display. Others were more closely aligned with what Roby (1985) has termed a dialectical discussion between teacher and students. Each written description of a participatory context (i.e., a segment of a videotaped lesson that was judged to be representative of the entire lesson) became part of an imaginary continuum having discussion and recitation as its two endpoints.

The second part of the data analysis consisted of checking for the occurrence of the eight participatory contexts across classrooms. For that analysis, I used 16 similar classrooms as comparison units.

Results

The findings from the present study suggested that teachers of English and Social Studies content tended to inhibit student initiated exchanges with the teacher and/or student-to-student exchanges. Consonant with the three basic moves of recitation, one Social Studies teacher solicited a student to answer a question, listened to the student's response, and then evaluated or modified it, using the textbook as criterion.

T. So what rights and freedoms were guaranteed to the citizens who settled in the Northwest Territory, Shawn?

Shawn. Freedom of religion, trial by jury

T. And there was one other thing your text mentioned.

Social Studies Teacher #2 also controlled who talked to whom, when, and about what. However, she did it in a manner somewhat different from Social Studies Teacher #1. Teacher #2's patterned question/answer rhythm resulted in a pacing of the instruction that enabled her to maintain control of the students' talk while she simultaneously evaluated their responses.

T. All right, but if it wants to grow and prosper what? Kerrie?

Kerrie. A strong government was needed.

T. A strong government was needed.

Literature Teacher #1 attempted more critical thinking questions than did either of the two social studies teachers. However, his wording of the questions was often vague;

T. Donna, do you agree with that?
Donna. Agree with what?
Debbie. That the author was in favor of TJ?
T. Yeh.
Donna. Yeh.
T. What's he...What can you do with that?
T. Can you go ahead with anymore?
T. What can you do with that?

This vagueness in wording sometimes prompted a student to refuse to answer, which in turn caused the teacher to nominate a different student. What might have been an opportunity to sustain some student-to-student interaction, therefore, was lost in the process. Like the other teachers discussed so far, Literature Teacher #2 controlled who talked to whom, when, and about what by following the three step recitation pattern.

Both science teachers relied heavily on tying the content to their students' interests. Science Teacher #1 encouraged students to ask questions of her and of what they read. She tolerated, with seemingly endless patience, the many tangents students took. Yet, according to her stated lesson goal, the appropriate amount of content was covered.

Shifts in control between student-initiated talk and her own occurred frequently. Typically, however, she did not attempt to foster student-to-student interaction, possibly because she sensed they did not have the requisite background knowledge to carry on a discussion about radioactivity. Science Teacher #2 built an entire unit on biomes around the aquarium that he kept stocked in his classroom. By relating terms such as direct competition, habitat, and niche to the lifespace within the aquarium, he was able to maintain not only a high degree of interest in the subject matter but a fair degree of student-initiated talk as well. A problem solving situation arose when he added two catfish to the tank. Students volunteered anecdotal accounts of what they had heard concerning similar attempts to get fish to adapt to a new environment. Like Science Teacher #1, he appeared unconcerned that students frequently initiated questions that took the class off on a tangent. Shifts in control from the teacher to the students and back again formed a pattern of classroom discussion considered representative of this teacher's interaction with his students.

Of the two health/human development teachers, Teacher #1 more closely resembled the two science teachers in her willingness to follow up on student initiated topics. Also, like the two science teachers, she sensed the need to relate content specific vocabulary terms to students' everyday world. Frequent shifts in who controlled the direction of the group's instructional talk, coupled with group interaction patterns that bore little or no resemblance to the recitation method, marked this teacher's participatory norms as falling near the discussion endpoint of the imaginary continuum between

recitation and discussion. The participatory norms operating in Health/Human Development Teacher #2's classroom were also nearer the discussion end of the continuum, though for different reasons than those described above. Teacher #2 frequently planned his lessons around controversial topics so that students would be motivated to examine the pros and cons of an issue.

Breaks in the Established Participatory Norms

Any attempt to dichotomize human behavior patterns raises issues concerning the validity of such a practice. Still, for the purpose of this study, which was to compare and contrast eight content area teachers' expectations for student participation in instructional talk following a reading assignment, separating classroom interaction patterns that fell more toward the recitation end of the continuum form those that fell more toward the discussion end seemed in order. The problem of the dichotomy is somewhat lessened because of the triangulated information available through the analysis of the breaks in teachers' established participatory norms.

The social studies teachers permitted students to deviate from their established norm of nominating students to answer questions only for as long a time as the students were able to take turns speaking. When several students began to offer suggestions at once, the teachers reverted to the recitation format. One of the Literature teachers was not as subtle in his attempt to reestablish the participatory norm of nominating the students from whom he wished to hear. When several students did not come up with the answer he expected, the teacher

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discouraged Kenneth, as well as others, from asking any further questions.

Kenneth. Uh, I'm gonna ask you a good one.

T. Wait

T. Let me ask Mary Ella something.

When breaks in the established participatory norms occurred in classes taught by the science teachers and the health/human development teachers, they did not respond by suspending the norms; rather, each attempted to divert his or her students from pursuing the topic, at least temporarily. Also, it was of interest that both teachers used an outside information source as the diversionary instrument. For example, when the science teacher failed in her attempt to persuade her students to leave the topic of radioactivity, she promised to bring in some material to supplement the textbook's rather cursory treatment of that topic:

T. I think what we need to do here is to do some reading on this so that we really understand it.

T. I hear you saying that you really would like to know about this.

T. And so I will provide, uh, the means for you to do that.

T. I'll try to find some objective
material that presents it factually
so that you can decide for yourself.

She did not attempt to gain control of the situation by calling on students, thereby suspending her normal practice of letting them initiate the questions and the flow of the discussion.

Likewise, the health/human development teacher diverted Denise's attempt to monopolize the discussion on drug abuse by focusing her attention on a cartoon that Charles had found in a library book about the history of drug education in America. Although this teacher ignored Denise's question much like the literature teacher did with Kenneth's question, there is at least one important difference in the ignoring acts. The health/human development teacher did not let the ignored question die. She answered it indirectly in a subsequent discussion of the cartoon that Charles had found.

Discussion

In this study, eight content area teachers' expectations for student participation in post-reading discussions were examined. Whole class verbal and nonverbal interaction patterns fell within the two extremes on an imaginary continuum having recitation and discussion as its two endpoints. Based on the information available from this limited sample, a relationship appeared to exist between the type of interaction pattern observed (discussion vs. recitation) and the particular content area in which the observations were made. By comparison, teachers of social studies and literature content encouraged more recitation-like interactions than did their colleagues who taught science and

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health/human development content. The science and health/human development teachers, moreso than the social studies and literature teachers, expected students to participate in whole class discussion as a follow up to content area reading assignments.

Why such a relationship may exist cannot be determined from the present study's design. However, the findings do lend themselves to speculation. Perhaps the social studies and literature teachers in this study expected students to obtain more information from their textbooks than did the science and health/human development teachers. If so, their preference for the recitation method would make sense, given that teacher directed questioning and a dependence on the textbook for the "right answer" are characteristics of that method. No teacher volunteered information in any of the post study viewing sessions, however, that would lend credence to this speculation. Nor would the research on the role of the textbook in secondary school classrooms support such a notion (Ratekin et al., 1985; Smith & Feathers, 1983a, 1983b).

What did emerge from the present study, however, was evidence to support Bloome's (1983) finding that procedural display is a useful concept for understanding the socio-communicative context of reading at the secondary level. From the data he gathered in four urban middle school classrooms, Bloome concluded that teachers view the post-reading question and answer discussion as a procedure for getting students to "look at the appropriate place [in a text] and thereby know the answer" (p. 279). Similarly, data from the present study suggested that teachers did communicate certain procedural display models from which

students were able to pick up cues as to their expected participation in a whole class discussion.

Participatory expectation norms were best illustrated when breaks occurred in a teacher's established procedure for conducting a class discussion. For instance, teachers who favored recitation-like classroom interaction communicated a different kind of procedural display model than did teachers who favored discussion-like classroom interaction. When the former decided they were no longer willing to overlook a break in the participatory norms that they had set for a particular class, they engaged in a procedural display which typically included a return to the practice of nominating students to answer teacher initiated questions. Teachers who favored discussion-like classroom interaction, on the other hand, preferred to divert students from pursuing an unacceptable topic. The procedural model those teachers communicated was quite different.

A student's role, of course, is to pick up on the appropriate signals and thereby judge the extent to which he or she is expected to participate. The process is a complex one and often results in students playing games, such as second guessing the teacher. No doubt some students are relatively unaware of the procedural displays that different content area teachers present them with each period of the school day. Further study in the area of post-reading discussion practices should include a plan for systematically collecting data on students' perceptions of such practices.

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